

# Golden Yoga

Should yoga be an Olympic sport? These yogis think yes.

Words **Kerrie Davies** Main photos **Yie Sandison**

**O**n a Sunday afternoon in the foyer of the Zenith Theatre, Chatswood, a crowd is lining up for Mojo Kombucha organic non-alcoholic bubbles, and collecting their tickets for the Regional Yoga Asana Championship.

For many of the yoga competitors warming up backstage, the competition is the first step towards their Olympic dream. The International Yoga Sports Federation aims to have yogis wearing national colours alongside swimmers, runners and gymnasts at a future Olympic Games.

Jodie Petersen, President of the Yoga Sports Association Australia, is dedicated to promoting yoga as a sport. Stepping on stage, beside a spotlit yoga mat, she greets the audience who have taken their seats to see who will become the regional New South Wales/ACT yoga champion.

“We had 30 competitors when we started nine years ago and this year we have 150,” she welcomes. “This growth is inspiring and heartwarming. The two things I love most about the competition is the competitors evolve in a way they didn’t think was possible, and the second thing is it brings our community closer. To watch their hard work, dedication and commitment, I feel proud.”

But not all feel so enthusiastic. In the wider yoga community, competitive yoga is a paradox.

“It goes against the founding principles of yoga that we are letting

go of competition and judgment,” says Pip Reed, a Yoga-Fit instructor who has practised a Vinyasa (flow) for years.

“Yoga is about listening to your body and that mind-set (of competition) puts pressure on people who are already apprehensive about their flexibility and whether yoga actually suits them. I can’t imagine competing. It sounds like gymnastics.”

Rajashree Choudhury, five times yoga champion and wife of the founder of Bikram Yoga, counters that the competition is not measuring the yoga’s eight states – guidelines to lead a meaningful life – but is simply assessing the ‘asana’: the posture.

**A yogi who dies before achieving full realization carries with him the good karma of his past Kriya; in his new life he is propelled harmoniously towards his Infinite Goal.**

Paramahansa Yogananda,  
*Autobiography of a Yogi*

“If we deconstruct the Olympic Games, at its core lies a life philosophy that is not so different from the Yoga school of Hindu philosophy,” Choudhury adds.

According to the International Federation of Yoga Sports, yoga competition in its current form began about 200 years ago and a yoga competition takes place daily in India and, surprisingly, South America.

While the Yoga Championships are open to any yoga studio and the theatre’s air conditioning is a pleasant room temperature rather than hot yoga’s 40 degrees, few competitors hail from other forms of yoga other than Bikram. Helping out at the regionals is Nathan, who is wearing a t-shirt bearing the words, “Don’t you wish your yoga was hot like mine?” This pretty much sums up the majority of the crowd who are here to cheer their fellow golden yogis on.

The eldest, Margaret Low, who is in her fifties is among the most flexible contestant at the NSW/ACT regionals. The youngest is 11-year-old Caleb Ripley, who is one of three children competing in the 11–17 years age youth division. He may well be Australia’s first yoga Olympian at 2024 or beyond (the 2020 Summer Olympics, Tokyo, have already shortlisted squash, baseball/softball and wrestling as possible new sports).

“I’d love to represent Australia,” says the 2012 Australian Nationals men’s winner, Mark Valenton. He is back to





## Yoga Styles Explained

**Know the difference between SUP Yoga, Doga and Future? As yoga's popularity grows, new hybrids of styles keep stretching the classics. Here's our yoga guide and where to do it:**

**SUP Yoga** Yoga on a Stand Up Paddleboard. Also known as wet yoga, as that's what is going to happen. [www.workoutonwater.com](http://www.workoutonwater.com)

**Acro Yoga** Yoga with your partner or friend in a variety of acrobatic style moves which also incorporate Thai massage. [www.yogabeyond.com](http://www.yogabeyond.com)

### Future Sound Yoga

The movements are a combination of traditional yoga poses and freeform dance with a live DJ. Think of a healthy nightclub. [www.futuresoundofyoga.com](http://www.futuresoundofyoga.com)

**Doga** Like baby and me yoga, but instead you do it with your dog outside on the beach. [hotyoga.com.au](http://hotyoga.com.au) (Coolangatta).

**Power Yoga** Vinyasa style yoga in a heated (rather than hot) room. Bondi, Manly, Neutral Bay. [www.powerliving.com.au](http://www.powerliving.com.au)

**Yoga-Fit** [Flamingopink.com.au](http://Flamingopink.com.au) health writer, Pip Reed, is Australia's only certified Yoga-Fit instructor, which is the biggest yoga training school in the world. "Yoga-Fit is a Vinyasa style focused on technique and alignment. It's more user-friendly." [www.pipreed.com.au](http://www.pipreed.com.au)

**Yoga Therapy** "This will be the next big thing in Australia," says Pip Reed. "It is specifically using yoga's stretching and meditation tailored as a form of therapy to treat depression, anxiety and other issues."

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Do all postures very slowly,  
without pain or straining.  
Breathe through the nose in  
all positions, except Shavasana.

Dharma Mittra, *Asanas: 608 Yoga Postures*

defend his title. "The Olympics would elevate the competition to the next level. But in the western world, it is not seen as a sport to most people. Unless you are involved in it, or as a spectator, you don't understand it is exciting to watch."

The competition is regulated with conditions and rules and indeed, like any other sporting event, all stimulants and alcohol are banned. James Campbell, Bikram yoga studio owner who is helping co-ordinate the event, thinks that drugs would be counter-productive anyway.

"Yoga is one of the few sports that can say it is drug free. If you used performance enhancing drugs in yoga, they would make you perform worse." Focus and stillness work together in yoga, as does flexibility, strength, and Kriya – the union of breath and soul.

**B**ack at the Regionals, Imelda Gunawan, attired in a cobalt blue leotard, readies herself on the stage's mat. She bows in prayer – namaskar – then releases her hands to her sides. The theatre is silent.

"Begin please," one of the three judges sitting in front of the stage requests.

"Standing Head to Knee," Imelda announces. Grabbing her upper right foot, she steadies on her standing leg with her thigh muscles taut and still. She breathes then extends her right leg until it is like a rod in front of her body; she breathes again then lowers her head to her kneecap.

"Standing Bow," she says. Her legs become a single vertical line of muscle, lightly held by one hand while the other reaches in front.

"Bow." Imelda drops to the floor grabs her ankles and arches upwards into a wheel of limbs.

"Rabbit." She curls forward in a ball with her neck flat on the floor.

"Stretch." Breathing calmly, she reaches her head to her feet.

"Om," she declares. She furls her legs around her face, supported by only her arms and a smile; she unfurls then stands up.

"Full standing bow," she announces her final pose. Imelda's foot curls around her back to rest on her shoulder, then as if just taking a step, she gracefully brings

her foot down to the resting pose.

"Wooh!" The crowd erupts. "Yeah!"

Earlier her training partner, Mark Valenton, shone in the men's division with the Om pose too, and with the equally difficult Crane. It's a menagerie of poses as other yogis attempt advanced poses named after animals, birds and insects, the most difficult being the tiger. The three judges, including a former national champion, scribble scores, which are then handed to the tallies sitting behind them. Points are deducted 50% for second attempts of poses.

"Men are given more points for flexible poses," Mark, an Apple Genius technician, explains. "And women are marked higher for strength."

Not every contestant is performing as well as Mark and Imelda, who are frontrunners for the Nationals Championship in February. The first of the five compulsory poses, Standing Head to Knee, has the worst wobble factor for nerves and general difficulty, says Jodie Petersen. As she expected, quite a few contestants ask for a second attempt of the pose, which Imelda insists

is just as impressive as the best routines.

"The competition changes these yogis. It transforms them physically and personally," Imelda says. "Their postures look stronger and they've become much more confident, focused and concentrated. The training towards the competition really pushed us to the next level. It almost feels like every time I come to class, I imagine myself being on stage. You have to always remain calm but it's not easy when you are being the spotlight with the audience watching you. The only competitor on that day is really yourself."

"One participant said at the start of the training schedule: I don't know why I'm doing this, my postures are crap, everything hurts," Jodie recounts to the audience from the stage. "She says now, I feel strong and so energised. I never thought my postures would improve this quickly. I feel like Wonder Woman and Popeye... But I'm still petrified."

At the very least, all the contestants look the part. While men are allowed speedos, the women cannot don scanty bikinis like the gymnastics competition dress code. Instead they wear colourful

and demure one-piece leotards and, like gymnasts, tie their hair in buns or angel plaits. The more flamboyant wear leopard prints.

Mark, in shimmering blue speedos, is once again awarded first place with a gold medal and a ticket to the Nationals. Imelda comes second to Kash Bazil, who wowed the judges with a full camel – a pose in which you are essentially bending to your toes in reverse – which would easily equal an Olympic gymnast's flexibility.

"I'm happy," says Imelda. "When I came off the stage, I thought, 'I did it!'

**O**ne Saturday after the competition, Mark and Imelda meet up at Darlinghurst Bikram College of India to practise for the Nationals event. Prior to a competition, they both attend daily 90-minute classes in the Bikram hot room, as well as these extra sessions. Imelda doesn't drink ("It puts me in a deep ocean," she says) but she doesn't have a special pre-training diet. Mark rehydrates with kale juices and coconut water.



Kash Bazil won the women's division at the Regional Yoga Asana Championship. Photo: Jacqueline K.G Logeman-Jansen, Bikram Yoga Canberra.





Winners of the Regional Yoga Asana Championship. Photo: Jacqueline K.G Logeman-Jansen, Bikram Yoga Canberra.

Imelda, who entered her first regionals last year in Brisbane, won a 'wildcard' to the 2013 Nationals, then honed her yoga through teacher training. In 2014, she hopes to go to the Internationals with Mark, who came 15th in the world at the 2013 event, held at the Sheraton LAX ballroom, Los Angeles in June.

"It was very intimidating but I was there to show what I had accomplished," Mark says about the Internationals. "I would do it all over again in a heartbeat."

In the yoga studio, Imelda scrutinises Mark's scorpion, in which he reverses his legs to his head like a scorpion tail.

"Do it again," she instructs. "This time, bring your feet down to touch your forehead." He makes a second attempt, straining his toes towards

his head. The room begins to heat in preparation for the afternoon class.

The contortion is all the more impressive when Mark mentions that he only started yoga a year before the 2012 competition to lose 13 kilos and "hated every minute of it." There's no sign of flab now in his Speedos. While he's risking injury again today by pushing his body beyond normal flexibility, he vows he will pare back rather than push harder lest he risk his daily practice.

"I think because yoga in the western world is seen to be relaxing and holistic, sometimes my friends think it is comedic when I say I am yoga injured. I have taken a different approach to training this year. I'm listening more to my body. It's a balancing act but it's what keeps me grounded and focused."

For all her energy that she pours into the competition, Jodie Peterson seems to agree.

When the yogis gathered on stage for a final bow, she told them, "I speak for everyone when I say we are in awe of you. You have inspired people to get back to yoga, take up yoga and work harder in yoga. Thank you for your courage and vulnerability."

"It is not a competition with each other," Jodie continues. "It is a competition within yourself doing what you love and cherish. Our real mission is to promote yoga to the world. We believe it changes your life." ☺

**Australian National Yoga Asana Championship**  
Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre – 10 February 2014  
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